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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with some of the characteristics of good open education as espoused by its proponents. It then discusses the three types of relational patterns which are exhibited by children in the classroom. According to the author, these three relational patterns demonstrate that the ability to handle an open classroom situation varies enormously from one child to another. Thus, approaches to enhance independent learning and creative expression must be varied. Finally, the article deals with the efficacy of open education vis a vis its ideals. (Author/HMV)

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CHALLENGE TO OPEN EDUCATION

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The theme of this symposium is the role of the psychologist in today's society. I think that it is vital to these discussions to raise the question of what type of society we are attempting to achieve? We as psychologists and as citizens of a society stand as the Greek diety Janus looking both backward and forward. We must accurately describe what was and what is, but we must also have an idea of what can be. There are really two general functions the psychologist should be asked to perform: a diagnostic-research function and a prescriptive-guidance function. The highly valued diagnostic-research function views phenomena and assesses where we are at, and what difficulties and problems exist. Diagnosis and research aid us in identifying and organizing the facts in a problem situation, but no less important is the prescriptive-guidance function which permits the psychologist to offer movement from the present state of affairs to a better one. In order to prescribe, however, the psychologist should possess some conception what a healthy place to live would be. Fromm in his well known book, The Sane Society, provides one description of such a place.

"A healthy society furthers man's capacity to love his fellow man, to work creatively, to develop his reason and objectivity, to have a sense of self which is based on the experience of his own productive powers (Fromm)."

At this point I am not suggesting that all psychologists subscribe to this conception of a society (though I do), but only that psychologists possess a larger perspective than present concerns.

The school as the institution responsible for learning in a society plays a large part in the encouragement of the sort of individual who can best realize a healthy society. Open education in its better examples provides an atmosphere which facilitates the characteristics mentioned by Fromm. Creative expression, exploration and discovery of the regularities of life, a joy in learning, sound self esteem, independence in judgment, and social sensitivity are among the qualities which are valued in an open classroom. Later we will view a portion of the research on open education as it touches upon some of these behaviors--most particularly self-esteem, independence in judgment, and creativity.

I would like to now mention the way in which I wish to approach our discussion of open education. We first will briefly deal with some of the characteristics of good open education as espoused by its proponents. Next I would like to bring to your attention the three types of relational patterns which are exhibited by children in the classroom. Among other reasons for our emphases upon these three types of relational patterns is to demonstrate that the ability to handle an open classroom situation varies enormously from one child to another. Thus, approaches to enhance independent learning and creative expression must be varied. A conception of school which would be well suited to Fromm's idea of a healthy society would be one in which differential environments were provided to meet the different needs of students. Environments would be structured to meet the child where he is and generate movement to higher levels of intellectual and social effort. Finally we will view the efficacy of open education vis a vis its ideals. We will be concerned not only with what open education does or does not do, but with what it overlooks as well. From all of this I hope we will have a

strengthened picture of where open education is and what challenges confront it.

Traub has described the open approach to school as one which gives children the opportunity "to explore their school environment; to make decisions about their own learning; to work at their own pace, following their own style; to learn from concrete experiences before making abstract generalizations; to make errors, presumably without fear of censure, and to be helped to learn from them (Newton and Hall, 1974)." This sums up things rather nicely. From this statement flow certain assumptions about children's learning. Roland Barth has concisely catalogued a number of assumptions underlying open education. Let's look at a few of the more pertinent ones. First,"children are innately curious and will explore without adult intervention (Barth)." If left alone, children by their very nature are involved, keen explorers of their surroundings. They can't help but learn. A bit later we will see that this assumption can lead to severe difficulties when the teacher attempts to apply it in a blanket way to all children. That, in fact, many children--most perhaps--will not come to the teacher as eager, self-propelled learners. And unless this is recognized, efforts to provide differential classroom environments for different children's needs will be impeded.

A second assumption is that "opportunities to explore, to try and fail in the absence of threat, contribute to a sense of mastery (Barth)." Moreover, this sense of mastery is acutely intertwined with the child's self esteem. This linkage between exploration, mastery, and self esteem occurs in the following way. The child's principal means of testing reality is through acting upon it (Becker). A child who is permitted exploration, is able to make choices and learn by the natural consequences

of these choices. As Ernest Becker has said, the "mind grows up as a registering of the consequences of what we do after we do it." In this way the child is able to build a repertoire of predictions about his world. As these predictions bear correspondence to the way things actually occur, the child develops a confidence that he is able to understand the world and have an impact upon it. Not only then does self esteem hinge upon open exploration and consequent feelings of mastery, but so also does a sense of independence.

Proponents of open education regard the atmosphere surrounding the learning task to be as important as the task itself. The emphasis in open education is upon providing free exploration of the environment which then results in the child's generating his own problems to be solved. As he encounters these perceived problems he produces strategies in order to handle them. As part of the process, he develops in the words of Ernest Becker "action possibilities" toward objects in his environment. He learns to see objects in terms of the effects that they have upon him and his world. He learns through activity. Thus, the possibilities of objects become the exciting base of learning. Collateral with this a sense of self esteem is being brought about.

This presents, I think you will agree, a very optimistic picture of the way the child learns. Is this in fact the way children learn? I would submit to you that some children do in fact learn in this way. I, however, doubt whether most children in the school would become the happy explorers pictured above. Part of this no doubt is because the school does not encourage this way of learning. But this is only part of the explanation. Some children even in the most encouraging of

atmospheres will still not exhibit the degree of openness, independence, and curiosity necessary to be the type of learner described above.

It might be helpful at this point to examine the three general ways in which children relate to the situations, persons, and things in their classroom environment. These ways of perceiving and behaving we will call relational patterns. The three relational patterns that will be described characterize three corresponding general types of children: the survivor, the adjustor, and the encounterer. The relational patterns differ in their openness to experience, their ability to learn independently, their maturity, and their capacity to operate freely.

The most immature and the least open of the relational patterns is that of survival. A child operating at the survival level is concerned with merely getting through time and space without disturbing his established ways of satisfying needs. For whatever reason--perhaps he has learned that his environment is a dangerous and painful place, and cannot by his efforts be mastered--the child wishes to keep things constant and reduce the amount of change in his world. Accordingly, his behavior is extremely stereotyped and rigid. When confronted by a new situation, he will ignore its special demands and treat it as if it were no different than previous situations. Where problems arise the survivor unsuccessfully attempts to meet them by responding with generally inappropriate behavior. He may, for example, be prone to lash out destructively or withdraw completely when a problem situation presents itself. To the observor, it would appear that such behavior is self-defeating--and it is--but it serves the function of preventing the child from involving himself and opening himself to something in his environment that may prove overwhelming.

Here, after all, is a child with little confidence in his ability to alter matters by direct action. Often times we see in some children exhibiting the survival pattern, an inability to delay impulse and delay immediate gratification of a presently felt need. It is almost as if he were prisoner to his inner urges. As an effect, he has little power of mediation over his action. In short, he can not consider before he acts.

The seeming advantage of the survival pattern is safety through predictability and the reduction of uncertainty. Its disadvantages are obvious. Since he does not, in the words of David Franks, "risk poor input," he cannot grow; he denies himself the opportunity to learn better ways of coping with his environment; and he is bound to the immediate satisfaction of his basic needs. The net effect is that he is not open even in the most open of classroom environments. We will return to this point later.

The second relational pattern is that of adjustment. At this level the child is less preoccupied with predictability and is far more open to others than was true of the survivor. The adjustor's concern is that of learning what is expected of him by others and then producing corresponding behavior. His sensitivity to a reference group's norms and expectations reminds one of David Riesman's other-directed individual. His reinforcements and rewards come from the response of others to his behavior. Security comes from being able to assess what is being "paid off" in a situation and then affecting the behavior that will cash in. He is intolerant of divergence from the perceived correct ways of behaving, thinking, and valuing. While the adjustor is not fearful of change, as was true of the survivor, awareness of change and novelty is controlled.

New ways of thinking and behaving are first sanctioned by an individual or reference group representing authority, and then are introduced to the adjustor. Thus, a slow flow of acceptable change is ensured. As a result, he experiences very few things first hand. The picture of the adjustor that is emerging is one of a child vitally concerned with the "right way."

The advantages of this pattern over the survival patterns are apparent. There is less rigidity, more awareness, more sensitivity to others. Yet the limitations of the adjustor are striking. Though he may believe otherwise, he is not directing his own life. He must always wait for the green light before he attempts something new. Not only is he unresponsive to individuals who represent different and therefore unacceptable ways of doing things, but he is not open to entertain divergent possibilities residing within himself. To this extent he is less than open and no classroom environment will automatically open him.

The relational pattern of greatest maturity (and it should be added that maturity has little to do with chronological age) is that of the encounterer. Many educators and psychologists (among them Jean Piaget, Eric Erikson and John Holt) have described the individual functioning at this level. In contrast with the adjustor and survivor, the encounterer is less concerned with security and certainty, and is much more occupied with what Erikson referred to as an inner mechanism which permits the individual "to turn passive into active" and "to maintain and regain in this world of contending forces an individual sense of centrality, of wholeness, and of initiative (Erikson)."

John Holt (1969) depicts what we have called the encounterer in this way. He is a child who "wants to make sense out of things, find out

how things work, gain competence and control over himself and his environment." Holt then goes on to say, "He is open, receptive, and perceptive. He does not shut himself off from the strange, confused, and complicated world around him. He observes it closely and sharply, and tries to take it all in. . .He is experimental. . .he wants to find out how it works, and he works on it. . .He can tolerate an extraordinary amount of uncertainty, confusion, ignorance, and suspense. We, at once, see the agreement between this description of the encounterer and open education's assumptions of the way in which children learn. Open education's call for the child's engagement in active exploration of his world and the ensuing sense of mastery and independence describe the very mode by which the encounterer functions.

While the encountering relational pattern would indeed seem to be the one most worthy of nurturing, it has been my experience and observation that the schools have almost exclusively fixed upon and promoted the adjustment pattern. Teachers expect their students to accept the given ways of behaving and knowing. As Dreeben (1968) in his interesting book, On What Is Learned In School directly puts it: "To the question of what is learned in school (I answer) pupils learn to accept principles of conduct, or social norms, and act according to them." Some children learn this sort of thing better than others. The survivors are hard to reach, difficult on the teacher, difficult on the other members of the class. They frequently become the special students. They are not viewed as the best of learners.

Neither, however, are the encounterers. Their independence of mind and spirit make them question those principles of conduct and norms, to which Dreeben refers, as to some greater personal meaning. In

conventional classes the encounterer presents many difficulties. Torrance, Yamamoto, Getzels and Jackson, among others, have found that the child who exhibits independence and creative behavior is generally castigated and isolated by his classmates, and is viewed as bothersome by their teachers.

We have seen that the mode of learning and behaving which the encounterer brings to classrooms is that which open educators generalize as being revealed by all children. However, we have also viewed two other general patterns which present quite different orientations to the classroom environment. The survivor is not open and, in fact, out of fear of the outside seals himself off from it; similarly the adjustor is also far from open, concerning himself mainly with the security and rewards of being right. It is important to keep in mind the type of child we wish to encourage in the schools of our society. But in order to generate change in this direction, it is also essential to realize that different children have different needs and dispositions. Unless this is recognized, the school will not be in a position to provide the kinds of environments necessary to meet these differing needs.

John Holt and other educational naturalists have maintained that all a child needs in order to be free and productive is to be placed in an open classroom environment on his own mettle and resource. He would, as it were, be an instant encounterer. From what has been said about the survivor and the adjustor, it would appear that encountering is not automatic!

Some children arrive at school as encounterers and we have mentioned there is an unfortunate press to make adjustors of them. The prescription for such children is to encourage their bent, to entrust them with much

of their education, as well as to support and challenge them. Too, their exists a great need to invest the adjustor with greater amounts of self-direction. Shortly we will view some research which indicates that the open environment provisioned for different levels of maturity can generate independent behavior.

It is, however, the needs and condition of the survivor that Holt does not duly recognize. This child if placed in a free environment with little intervention would not suddenly become liberated. He if anything would be worse off, for then there would be no resistance to his self-defeating patterns. (We would not see the survivor transformed into a curious, happy explorer. These are children who actually possess a fear of new experience.) With them, as Shirley Cohen aptly states, "coping does not always mean a direct path toward higher and more mature levels of functioning." For the controls binding the survivor are more often inner rather than outer. He feels the game is not worth the effort. What is essential in approaching the survivor is a structured environment where carefully selected tasks, well within the capabilities of the child, are presented to him. Along with this a system of reinforcement is introduced which makes the game worth playing. From this approach the child learns that he is capable of mastering certain areas of his environment; he begins to feel successful and as a result becomes involved in what is going on around him.

What is being suggested is a movement from the survival pattern to the adjustment pattern. It is a progression which requires the acumen and direct intervention of caring school personnel. Clearly such planning and guidance is necessary for this kind of progression to occur,

rather than assuming that the survivor will spontaneously metamorphose into an encounterer.

As the child becomes more confident of his abilities and more involved in his classroom environment, he is then ready for a greater degree of self-direction in his learning. He is also ready for a more open environment. He is no longer a survivor (as far as school is concerned), but instead an adjustor moving toward encountering. As Jerome Kagan has pointed out, discovery learning hinges upon the child's involvement and intellectual effort. Thus, the antecedents to open education for the child are a caring for and an involvement in the learning situation as well as a confidence that he can handle and learn from the world around him.

Let us examine some pertinent research on open education to determine what behavior is actually encouraged in the open environment. David Franks has been involved in contrasting five parochial open schools with five parochial conventional schools in the Kansas City area. It is significant to point out that eight of the ten schools serve almost exclusively culturally disadvantaged populations. Some interesting findings concerning the degree of independence fostered in the open situation are beginning to emerge. Franks looked at the internal-external locus of judgment among students participating in the schools. Internal and external judgment were determined by the criteria by which the child evaluates his actions and products. External judgment would involve the student looking to individuals other than himself to determine what he is to do and how well he performs. In sum, an adjustor orientation. Conversely, internal judgment is seen when a student consults his own

sense of what he is to do and how he is doing. He does this by observing the effects of his own actions and consulting his own sense of accomplishment. In answer to the question of "what works better for you when the teacher gives you a topic or when you pick the topic?", Franks found the majority of students in each of the open schools selected the option which gave them the locus of choice. Conversely, between 64 percent and eighty percent of the children in the conventional schools preferred to have the teacher assign the topic. In responding to the question "how do you know when you've done a good job?", eighty percent of the students in conventional groups selected external criteria (such as teacher comments, grades, report cards) while only forty-two percent of the open school students relied on such criteria.

The findings of Franks are similar to those of Knowles who investigated three different classroom environments--open ("free and exploratory"), structured ("geared to the acquisition of specific responses and skills"), and traditional--and their relationship to internal-external locus of control. Using the question of "What makes you happy?", the researcher judged responses as to whether the child perceived his happiness to be dependent upon forces outside his control. This would, of course, represent an external locus of control. Knowles found significantly more internal control among students attending the open classroom than the other two educational settings. (Interestingly the structured classroom revealed more internal control than the traditional classroom.) These studies would seem to provide evidence that the open environment stimulates independence of choice and judgment.

Related to independence and exploration is the open classroom's valuing of the creative process in the child. C. H. Patterson (1973) has stated that traditional schools "are geared to conformity in thinking as well as behavior. The creative student is discouraged, so that creative potential, which is present to some degree in everyone, is gradually extinguished in our schools." Two colleagues and I (Williams, Harlow and Tuebner) went about examining the question of whether measured creativity is more prevalent in the open classroom than the conventional classroom. We compared performance between open classes and conventional classes on the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking. To our surprise we found that the students in the open classroom were not more creative than their counterparts in the conventional classroom. Similarly, Gerhardt and I, when contrasting scores on the Torrance Tests found no significant difference between open and traditional classrooms in Kansas.

A complete explanation for these findings is not available. When one observes the workings of the open classroom it would, indeed, seem that the accent is upon the students own approach to a problem. One partial explanation for the less than expected performance by the open classroom students is the factor of standardized testing. The Torrance Tests are highly structured in their administration. Students in open situations as a rule have not had much experience taking tests--whether classroom tests or standardized tests. It is conceivable that the results of the two investigations could reflect a lack of practice in taking tests rather than the actual creative behavior of the open classroom students. Another explanation for the lack of difference in measured creativity, is offered as a criticism of some open situations. With an emphasis upon the

enjoyable and upon students' determination of the pace and termination of learning tasks, it has been my observation that students will move from one activity to another before they have either exhausted the possibilities of an activity or have completed the task. Students in these situations have not been challenged and encouraged by the teacher to see a task through to conclusion. In creative efforts, enjoyment must eventually yield to the labors of refinement. Fun and joy may actually keep the child from confronting and wrestling with the difficult. Easiness is not synonymous with creativity. The creative process in children is aided not only by free exploration and a joyful atmosphere, but by challenge and guidance by appreciative individuals. A delicate tension probably must always exist in the classroom between the wishes and activities of the creator and the facilitation and testing of the caring teacher.

CONCLUSION

We began our discussion by pointing to the dual function of the psychologist in our society. The psychologist must not only accurately describe what is, but also must have an idea of where we should be. Viewing the school as an institution which makes a gigantic imprint on what type of society we will have and what kinds of individuals will people it, it was our contention that different instructional environments characteristically generate different patterns of behavior. Conventional educational practice frequently encourages an adjustment relational orientation, while open education values the encountering relational pattern. The open environment in its better examples is contributive to Fromm's ideal of a healthy society. We reviewed some evidence which

reveals that independent judgment and self direction is engendered in good open environments.

Additional research exists which demonstrates that children in open classrooms generally feel better about school and, perhaps more importantly, about themselves than those in conventional rooms (among others, Wilson, 1972; Reid, 1972; and Fargo Madison School Program). The appreciation by the child of learning as a central area of his personal life is one of the greatest benefits of open education. This does not mean that every child attaches a sense of meaning to his experiences in the open classroom, only that there is a greater likelihood of its occurrence in the open class.

This brings us again to the caveats against assuming that all children are equally ready for the open classroom. Some children, as we have seen, find the experience overwhelming. McKinney (1973) found that disadvantaged educable handicapped students placed in an open situation spent "a disproportionate amount of time wandering around the room, waiting for instructions or attention, standing on the outside of (an) activity watching and conversing about things other than the...task...(They) frequently generated attendant behavior problems." McKinney felt difficulties could have been resolved by providing adequate structure for these survival patterns of behavior.

It would seem then that the challenge to open education is in recognizing the need for providing different structures for different levels of maturity and involvement--what we have called relational patterns. Whether this differential structure can be accomplished in the open classroom environment is dependent upon the skills and willingness

of the teacher. I have seen examples of differential sub-environments provided within the open environment, but in such cases there was a very special teacher who usually had assistance from either parent helpers or teacher aides.

But it can be done!

Perhaps a more practical means of approaching this goal is to provide alternative classrooms. Alternatives, however, which are geared toward helping children eventually function productively in an open situation. There have been entirely too many sad experiences where children presenting the survival pattern have spent a great part of their school career in exclusively special education programs. Movement to more self-direction and responsibility has not been promoted in our schools as it should.

It seems that traditional education has underestimated the child's capacity for self-direction and independent learning and as a consequence has not promoted these qualities. It also seems that open education may sometimes overestimate this capacity. Proponents have at times assumed these qualities to be present in some children when they were not, or assumed that these qualities would appear automatically when classroom conditions became more open. If I had to choose--which we do not--between overestimating or underestimating a child's capacity, I would with some hesitation choose overestimating. For it may be, as was true in the example set by Don Quixote, that by assuming a maturity in those around us, some students will respond in a manner which fulfills our confidence and surprises even themselves.

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